

Introduction to Semiotics: DSGN 3100-1

Instructor: Robert Currie
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Class: Monday 9:00-12:00, Location N230
Credit Value: 3 Credits
Website nscad.geneva9.com/dsgn3100/

Calendar Description:

This course surveys various theories of signs especially with relation to problems of visual communication. Prerequisite: 6 credits LAS. This course is cross-listed with CSTU 3100.

Planned Schedule:

Class 1 Introduction to semiotics
Class 2 Anatomy of signs:
Assignment - finding and classifying signs
Class 3 Models of Communication
Class 4 Barthes: codes and myths
Class 4 Rhetoric
Class 5 Barthes: Semiotics of design
Assignment: The semiotics of the Dollar Store
Class 5 Models of Communication
Class 6 Political semiotics
Class 7 Rhetoric:
Assignment: practical exercise in visual rhetoric and semiotics
Class 8 Urban semiotics: signs and the city
Class 9 Technical semiotics: Software, interfaces and communication
Semiotics of product design and architecture
Class 10 Greimas+McLuhan, bricolage and deconstruction
Class 11 Case study: How to apply semiotic analysis to a design problem
Class 12 Semiology of graphics
Class 13 Semiotics in advertising and marketing

Grade Weights

Assignments:.....60%
Class discussion20%
Written exam.....20%

Texts and readings: see web site

Additional readings: "The New Citroen" by Roland Barthes
"Semiotics in product design" by Sara Ilstedt Hjelm
"The Holy War: Mac vs. DOS" by Umberto Eco

Readings: Each class will include class discussion of assigned readings from the text or other sources.

Course Objectives: This course serves as an introduction to semiotics. Students will be expected to have gained an understanding of the main schools of thought in semiotics, an understanding of the types of signs, and how to apply semiotic and rhetorical principles to practical and written work.

By the end of the course, students should be familiar with the context of semiotics as it relates to philosophy, linguistics and contemporary critical theory, and be able to use semiotics as a core design problem-solving skill.

Estimated weekly time commitment for this course: A minimum of 9 hours of work in and out of class..

Responsibilities: Attendance at all classes and completion of all assignments is mandatory. Missed classes will only be excused with a doctors's note.

Grading System: Successful completion of this course requires that students perform to an acceptable standard in reaching the course objectives. This course will be graded as follows:

Letter Grade	Numerical Equivalent	Grade Point Score	Descriptive Term
A+	95 and above	4.3	Excellent
A	90-94	4.0	Excellent
A-	85-89	3.7	Very Good
B+	80-84	3.3	Very Good
B	73-79	3.0	Good
B-	67-72	2.7	Good
C+	63-66	2.3	Satisfactory
C	59-62	2.0	Satisfactory
C-	55-58	1.7	Satisfactory
D	50-54	1.0	Marginal
F(Fail)	49 and below		

At the end of the course, INCOMPLETE standing will be granted only in circumstances clearly beyond the control of the student (such as serious illness or bereavement) – at which time documentation will be required.

Grading Criteria: Completion of all assignments is mandatory. Evaluation will be based on a number of assignments, quizzes, and an essay assignment. Participation in class discussion will also account for a portion of the grade. Assignments and projects will be completed outside of normal instruction hours. Dates and details will be provided as the course progresses. All work must be submitted in English.

Accessibility

NSCAD University has a Policy on Disabilities (available on the NSCAD website) and is committed to providing equal opportunities to academically qualified students with disabilities. A key aspect of the policy is that students self-identify so that the appropriate accommodations can be made in a timely manner. Students with disabilities are responsible for initiating contact with the Coordinator of Financial Aid and Student Counseling (“Coordinator”) or the Disability Resource Facilitator in the Office of Student and Academic Services before or within two weeks of the commencement of each semester. All information regarding individual students with disabilities is respected as confidential.

All faculty, staff, and students are responsible for safe working practices and procedures so as to safeguard their own individual health and well-being as well as that of other members of the NSCAD University community.

Without a current NSCAD ID, students will not be permitted anywhere on the campus after hours.

Individual instructors will provide information regarding the consequences of non-attendance specific to their course syllabi. Please note that students who miss the first meeting of a class may be withdrawn from the class so that waitlist demands can be met.

Attendance Policy:

Class attendance at NSCAD is expected. Unexcused absences could result in lowered or failing grades. Any absences must be discussed with the course instructor who may request supporting documentation. Missing sequential classes that include essential health and safety training may result in the student having his/her enrolment in the course cancelled. Specific requirements for individual courses will be found in the course outline.

Plagiarism

NSCAD University has a policy on Plagiarism. This is a serious violation of Academic Integrity and penalties range from a zero for an assignment grade to Dismissal from the University. The Plagiarism Policy can be found at <http://nscad.ca/site-nscad/media/nscad/plagiarismpolicy.pdf>

Note: This course outline describes the course in general terms. Some changes in schedule may be unavoidable.

Planned Assignments

Assignment 1

Visually document 25 signs.

Label each one, and classify each example as indexical, iconic, or symbolic. Make sure each sign is one you have found and documented yourself - you may use photographs, sketches or text where appropriate.

Ensure that you are choosing a wide variety of signs, and not limiting yourself to obvious examples such as icons, way-finding signs, etc. Some signs may be difficult to classify, or may be difficult to designate as signs, but be prepared to justify their inclusion.

Submit as a PDF file. For each sign, note the signified (and if not obvious by the image) the signifier, and its Peircean category (index, icon or symbol). If sign spans multiple categories, note them. Lay out the document with multiple signs per page.

Assignment 2

Logos, Ethos, Pathos.

Locate three works of design - one for each of the three modes of rhetorical appeal. Create two alternate versions of each, using the other appeals. For example, if the work uses logos, create a version that uses ethos and pathos.

You do not need to redesign each work - you only need to submit an altered concept, using words to describe the new version. Submit as a PDF file.

Assignment 3

Dollar Store Semiotics

A sign is anything that can be used to tell a lie.

-Umberto Eco, A Theory of Semiotics

Make a visit to a Dollar Store. Choose a product that uses persuasion to suggest it is something it is not: healthy, genuine, effective, etc.

Carefully analyse the systems of signs present in the item, using techniques similar to those in class on the knockoff brand chocolate bar. Treat the item as expressing a rhetoric: a systematic series of signs and messages, all performing different tasks.

Make reference to the various rhetorical strategies and appeals (ethos/pathos/logos), denotative and connotative language, types of codes and their audiences. Write a descriptive essay, outlining the semiotic aspects of the item. Use Barthes's "Rhetoric of the Image" as an inspiration, if you need. The Semiotics of Food and Drink may also be helpful.

Length: 500-1000 words. You may use illustrations and other diagrams.

Assignment 4

Tropes and schemes

Review the Rhetorical Handbook. Choose a single type of physical product - furniture, architecture, etc.

Create four versions of it using different rhetorical schemes and tropes. Label each one, specifying the trope or scheme. You may use words or images (or both) to construct your versions. All of your versions must be of the same product - your task is to create different variations on it.

Assignment 5

Metaphor and Interface

Choose an interface for a real software or hardware device. Re-design it using a strong metaphor (or metaphors.) Create a 1-page, landscape-format document depicting the interface. This is not a visual design exercise, but an exercise in communicating a concept.

Be prepared to explain your concept in class, Nov 25, using concepts covered in the "A Semiotic Model Of User-Interface Metaphor" reading.